



May Week c1905 - 98.10

*c.36.97 : University May Week*

1899 06 08

The gaieties of the May Term have today been enhanced by the appearance of the Australian cricketers. Last night famous Grassy and Ditton Paddock were the scene of brilliant assemblages of beauty and fashion. Cambridge is full for the Eights week and looking at her best. The fair sex - a mighty host - seem to be arrayed in their most killing attire. Almost everybody - who is anybody - seems to have got his people "up", and everybody's people appear resolutely determined to enjoy themselves - 1899 06 08

1901 06 12

On the occasion of the annual ball the precincts of picturesque Clare College were lavishly illuminated and decorated. The centre path of the court was covered in and carpeted; palms were placed in groups on the lawn and the whole court made brilliant with hundreds of fairy lamps and Chinese lanterns. Rows of fairy lamps along the river side gave the garden a particularly beautiful appearance. Dancing took place in the hall and the combination room. There were 21 dances on the programme and three supper dances. Supper was set in the reading room 01 06 12

1904 06 11

During 'May' Week the permanent part of the population takes much coin of the realm from the floating part but this year visitors seemed likely to be well down because of the weather. Then on Thursday sunbeams brought a large number of visitors bringing with them awe-inspiring loads of luggage. Airy dresses of muslin and chiffon and a boating excursion are inseparable to the feminine. They were very comfortable during the all-too-brief spell of sunshine but then the ladies grew colder and colder until in desperation they gratefully accepted loans of jackets and even overcoats from their male escorts. Thus the racing was not as picturesque as it might have been. 1904 06 11

1904 07 02

Few realise the lavish expenditure on the May Balls held in Cambridge Corn Exchange. After the corn merchants have vacated the building on the Saturday evening a small army of workmen take possession. They labour until midnight when the advent of the Sabbath and the strict rules governing municipal buildings shut them out for 24 hours. With the first hour of Monday morning they re-enter

and by eight that evening the place is transformed into an artistic ballroom through which not a vestige of the prosaic Corn Exchange is seen. What of the cost? There is not less than £2,000 worth of goods in the ball room; add to that the cost of utilising the Guildhall as a supper room and include the china and plates for the supper and you have a total of some thousands of pounds to provide our moneyed visitors with an evening's entertainment. CDN 2.7.1904

1906 06 09

Cambridge has surrendered to May Week visitors very completely. These pretty butterflies, who transform our mundane streets into kaleidoscope scenes of colour and animation, mean increased profit for the tradesman and are a source of joy to the lodging-house keeper. They must have somewhere to lay their heads, dainty dinners and mayonnaise for supper. They cause money to circulate and many is the summer holiday they provide for the householders who provide rooms for their comfort. 06 06 09b

1907 06 08

The boat procession used to be the most popular of the May Week gaieties. The brilliant blazers of the collegians, the varied colours of the ladies' charming costumes, the prettily adorned boats together with the enlivening strains of an excellent band all combined to make a scene of colour and animation. The gathering fell through owing to the apathy of the boating men who objected to dressing up to be looked at. But it is a great pity 07 06 08a

1909 06 11

Record number of May Week visitors – 09 06 11

1911 06 16

May week celebrations – 11 06 16e

1913 06 06

'If you want to spend a gay week, come to Cambridge for the May Week and we'll promise lots of merriment and fun'. Cambridge May Week is now in full swing. We have long ceased to wonder at the anomaly of a May Week which comes in June and lasts a fortnight. According to the 'Onlooker' it was in the year 1882 that the May Races, around which all the festivities have grown up, changed their date from May to June. But custom dies hard and people would be horrified if anyone were so bold as to suggest an alteration now 13 06 06 p7 CIP

1914 06 19

May Week will be remembered as the low-water mark in the long series of "Mays". Tradesmen unanimous that business has never been so dull. The gaiety and brightness has diminished and the number of visitors shows considerable decrease as compared with last year 14 06 19 CIPof

1919 06 11

May Week Revival Favoured with brilliant weather, without even the proverbial thunderstorm, May Week, revived in Cambridge this year with all its glory, has been one great success. The festivities have been very much as in pre-war days. There have been the usual brilliant and select functions, including balls, college Concerts, garden parties, etc. The revival has been welcomed by University and Town people alike but the number of visitors has not been as great as had been anticipated generally 19 06 11 [3.11]

1922 06 13

"May week" has reached its second phase and the gaiety of the "Boats" has given places to a wonderful round of college balls and concerts. The May Week Ball of the First and Third Trinity Boat Clubs was probably one of the largest affairs of the kind that has ever been held in Cambridge. Hitherto, owing to a lack of accommodation the numbers attending has had to be restricted to about 650. Mr D.G. Marshall of Jesus Lane, however, found a way out of the difficulty with a somewhat

novel scheme. A marquee 100 feet by 40 feet was erected on Market Hill facing the Guildhall and therein supper was laid. A delightfully cool effect was obtained by leaving open a part of the side of the tent nearest the fountain and having the fountain lit up with coloured electric lights in the background. Provision was made for some 1,100 guests and supper was served in three relays of 375 each, a special staff of chefs from the House of Commons was specially engaged for the occasion 22 06 13

1923 06 12

The opening days of the second week of the "Mays" celebrations are usually noted for the array of college balls and concerts, and this year is well in keeping with tradition. On Monday there were three of these functions, - Caius, Clare, and First and Third Trinity in addition to four concerts and a special dinner-dance at the Rendezvous, and in each case a success can be recorded. The weather had improved to such an extent that it allowed the usual outdoor part of the events to be carried out to the full, and ample sitting out accommodation provided in various courts and grounds. The largest function was at Trinity, where the attendance numbered something like 1,400 or 1,500. 23 06 12

1926 06 19

So far May Week has been a pale and melancholy ghost of its former self. What with the powerful counter-attraction of Ascot, the fact that a good many of the men have already "gone down", the restricted train service and the gloomy uncertainty of the weather, Cambridge is having a bad time just now and tradesmen, hotel and lodging-house keepers, boat-proprietors and others who look to May Week to bring a little much-needed grist to their mill have received a severe blow. Usually May Week comes before Ascot, and visitors to the Mays have been accustomed to go from Cambridge to Ascot. Now that Ascot is over there seems to be no reason which the process should not be reversed 26 06 19

1927 06 13

One of the largest crowds in memory witnessed the last of what may go down in history as the "Microphone Mays". Both banks of the Cam at Ditton presented the spectacle of an unbroken line of sightseers. There were three men up a tree at Ditton Paddock; they and their friend the microphone were telling all England what was happening and theirs was truly a romance of the tree tops. One wonders how many old Cambridge men were listening-in to a drama in which they once played a part. 27 06 13

1930 06 17

All records were broken at Trinity ball when 1,700 guests attended the most brilliant of the May Week functions. Many townspeople waited to see the guests arrive and crowds flocked to Garret Hostel Bridge to view the grounds in all their evening glory. Up to mid-day next morning occasional stragglers, heavy-eyed but cheerful could be seen walking driving about the town. One such pair were mutually photographed beside their car in Silver Street. Sports coats over white waistcoats were common and in one a dishevelled figure in a flannel dressing gown lolled at the wheel, like a character in a Edgar Wallace film. 30 06 17a

1933 06 12

Saturday was one of the quietest bump supper nights on record. A few blazered undergraduates wearing dress shirts roamed the streets and occasionally a cheer could be heard. Then there was a squad of those who went through various drill movements, using the pavement as a parade ground. But they were remarkably steady, and mild, possibly because the bump-supper beer was likewise! A constable remarked, "Sid Moon (the News cartoonist) should draw a cartoon of an empty Market Hill with a yawning policeman, because that all there's doing tonight" 33 06 12a

1933 06 13

Over 1,300 dancers disported themselves at the First and Third Trinity Boat Club's ball. As usual there were large crowds of spectators lining all the entrances and not a few on the river but great precautions had been taken to avoid gate crashing with two lots of 'sentries'. Inside the place was aglow with thousands of coloured lights while the dance tent itself, with its famous parquet floor, was

electrically lit. From a dais in the centre the Embassy band played a sweet programme of dance music until the early hours of the morning. 33 06 13b

1935 06 18

May Week entered its ballroom phase with the twinkle of fairy lights and the dazzle of evening frocks. The biggest ball was that arranged by the First and Third Trinity Boat Club which was attended by 1,200 people. The flood-lit bridge stood out pearly white against the shadowy outlines of college buildings and hundreds of fairy lanterns made a necklace of living fire round the lawns of the Backs while Chinese lanterns hung in the trees along with coloured light indicators which showed the number of the dance in progress. Here and there a brazier gleamed dully, spitting steam in protest against the rain which sought to dampen their fire. 35 06 18

1936 06 24

Burning the boat at Jesus College following success at Lent Race – photo – 36 02 24

1937 06 16

At King's college May ball over 400 guests assembled to dance and make merry. It was a pity the night was not warmer but even so quite a few ventured on the river or wandered into the darkness to admire the scene from afar. The chapel was floodlit – though not with that subtlety one might have desired – and the college hall presented a gala atmosphere, contrasting with its customary sombre appearance. There was dancing to novelties such as the 'Lambeth Walk', fox-trots like 'The Loveliness of You' and a Noel Coward waltz. 38 06 16

1939 06 13

The weather was unreasonably dull for the annual First and Third Trinity Boat Club's Ball and rain meant that the delightful after-dance wandering over the grass was only indulged by the less cautious. Most welcome were the braziers delivering heat to shivering bodies. In the blue-and-white marquee Joe Loss and his dance orchestra reigned supreme playing the 'Eton Boating Song', 'Jeepers Creepers' and other dances. There were three suppers and the dance ended at 6 o'clock with a photograph. Amongst those present were M. Swithinbank, J.C. Balfour and the Earl of Euston. 39 06 13a

1947 06 11

The revival of May Week Balls in something of their full glory brings back to Cambridge something of the spirit of gaiety and colour which we knew before the war and which is now more than ever welcomed as much by townsfolk as by members of the University. The courts of Trinity presented a fairyland-like appearance with its lantern lit cloisters which were also decorated with palms. At Clare College the dining hall was used for dancing to the melodies of Tommy Kinsman's Band from London. Cyril Stapleton and his band provided the music for dancing at Downing College 47 06 11

1949 06 14

The May Balls have brought out a crop of new evening dresses. White, ideal for a summer dance was a favourite colour and diaphanous floating tulle tell to the fore as a material. I noticed several gaily striped or checked stiff taffetas, and a few with big flower patters, but plain colours predominated. Tiered skirts – three or even four of five tiers – are back. One or two of the ladies had fringed, silk shawls, draped over their shoulders and I noticed one carrying a pink feather fan 49 06 14

1950 06 08

In the sweet perfection of a fine tuned evening on the Backs, a record crowd listened to what is surely the loveliest of all events of May Week, the programme of madrigals sung by the Cambridge University Madrigal Society from punts moored beneath King's Bridge. An audience estimated at between 7,000 and 8,000, lined both sides of the bank as the oppressive heat of the day became tempered by the cool of evening. Even the loud moo of a cow in the paddock failed to break the spell, nor did the faintly-threatening note of a high-flying bomber, reminder of the sterner world out of which the magic of the setting and the sweetness of the singing lifted the listening thousands 50 06 08

1950 06 13

The dusk-to-daylight part of Cambridge May Week festival began last night. For seven or eight hours several of the colleges put on over their grey stone a party dress of coloured lights and other decorations to welcome dancers at their May Week balls. At Downing scintillating fountains spraying sparks, gorgeous aerial cascades of magnificent colour, night turned to day by brilliant rich light, the whole punctuated by an obbligato of crackles and bangs of varying volume made up the main framework of a memorable display. There were even "flying saucers" just to show that firework-makers move with the times 50 06 13

1955 06 15

May Balls are with us again. At Trinity Nat Temple and his band played for a large number of dancers, at St John's guests danced to the music of Hedley Ward and his orchestra while at Clare Tommy Kinsman provided music for everyone – one room being set aside for jiving! Downing had a marquee setting where two hundred couples danced to the music of Chappie D'Amato, who also played at Christ's. 55 06 15

1961 06 08

The 'popsey expresses' are pulling into the station and the city is fast filling up with young girls, here to watch the eights chase each other along the Cam and to dance through a succession of May Balls. There are also 20 concerts, 10 theatrical productions apart from the Footlight's annual frolic and countless exhibitions. Once again Cambridge will take May Week in its stride. It has become used to seeing the revellers in full evening dress walking through the streets for a good day's sleep just as we are beginning another good day's work. 61 06 08a

1962 06 20

May Ball rockets bring storm protest calls, Civil Defence man was pulling on uniform before realised it was fireworks [21.12]

1962 06 18

Queens college burn First boat May Races, first time won in college history [22.4]

1964 06 15

1st & 3rd Trinity burn boat - & fencing [22.7]

1980 08 09

Cambridge May Balls are four nights of student-organised revelry which will delight some and disturb the sleep of others. This year the cost of a double ticket has peaked at £52.50 and some feel they will be pricing themselves out of existence. But the same was being said ten years ago when Jesus and Trinity were charging eleven guineas. Some tickets do go to outsiders, with adverts often placed in London papers, but the majority of ball-goers are still students. 80 06 09a

1986 05 28

A May Ball is the most glamorous, ritzy event of the year and undergraduates don't mind paying for it. The most expensive double ticket for Peterhouse costs 125 guineas but includes dinner and free champagne all night. Trinity charges diners a more affordable £90. But the Ball everyone wants to go to is at Clare College where £220 has been paid on the black market by a couple desperate to attend. Its serene setting with the riverside gardens makes it the most romantic and Germany's 'Stern' magazine is covering it. 86 05 28a

1986 05 28

St John's College May Ball once featured the Rolling Stones and the Beatles on the same night. This year they have booked Imagination and Ruby Turner together with the Coldstream Guards and rock group The Inspirational Choir. There will be free drinks and a buffet all night long although roast

swan is no longer served. The 1,700 guests include 20 from the New York banking firm Goldmann Sachs and officers from the Sultanate of Oman will also be flying in. 86 05 28b

1986 05 28

Cambridge-based chart-toppers Katrina and the Waves will be the star attraction at Trinity College May Ball while Sandie Shaw will also be returning to the college where she sang before in the swinging Sixties. Jazz and steel bands – even Scottish pipers – will play till dawn. An all-night casino, laser displays and cabaret acts will also ensure there is no time to be bored. But King's College stopped holding May Balls in the sixties: students decided they were too expensive and not the sort of entertainment they wished to be associated with. They now hold June Events instead 86 05 28b